
KEV REYNOLDS

Prophets of Pyrénéisme

Gavarnie's backdrop is spectacular. The semi-circular walls of the Cirque rise more than 1300m above the scree to a group of 3000m summits that carry the frontier ridge. Streaked with waterfalls and layered with terraces of snow and ice, throughout the year these walls seduce climbers at the sharp end of the sport with extreme routes and seemingly impossible lines, all in a unique setting that represents the crucible of Pyrénéisme.

So it's fitting that the *mairie* of this little roadhead township should organise a celebration of mountains, using as a focus the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of the north face of the Tour du Marboré – a milestone in local climbing history. My invitation to this gathering came as a surprise, but flattered by it I've taken a few days off, and having caught a cheap flight to Pau and slept in a meadow last night, I now have a couple of hours or so to kill before the celebrations begin. There's just enough time to scamper up the trail beyond the churchyard where the pioneers lie buried, and reacquaint myself with this historic place where my own passion for the Pyrenees began so many years ago.

On the Plateau de Bellevue I perch upon a rock breathless among the flowers and gaze at the Cirque de Gavarnie whose summits wear a pillow of Spanish cloud. From out of that cloud the Grande Cascade pours its misty stream, its message but a distant 'whoomph' carried now and then by a stray breeze. All else is soundless, and on this perfect June Saturday I have the world to myself.

Later today I hope to meet for the first time the Ravier twins, with whom I've been corresponding for a quarter of a century. The Pyrenees is their domain; the Raviers who have dominated climbing activity here these past 50 years, whose routes are a guarantee of quality, and whose grasp of the range's history is all-embracing, their name has become synonymous with Pyrénéisme, and it's a privilege to have known them so long – albeit only by post.

Born in Paris in 1933, Jean and Pierre Ravier spent the war years at their maternal family home in Tuzaguet, a small village in the Pyrenean foothills where in their youth they ran wild and practically terrorised their neighbours. Though it is Bordeaux in which they've lived most of their lives since, Tuzaguet has been and still is their Pyrenean base camp, the springboard from which so many vertical adventures begin. From the village they had their introduction to the mountains with a family outing to the Néouvielle

lakes, and a year later (1947) climbed their first modest peak with a free-spirited woman who had a holiday home nearby.

Inspired by Gervasutti's *Scalate nelle Alpi* (translated into French as *Montagnes, ma vie*) and by Robert Ollivier's *Le Pic d'Ossau*, the brothers began to explore on their own, tackling the Dalle d'Allanz on Pic Rouge de Pailla above Gavarnie in 1950, and the following year the iconic Couloir de Gaube on the Vignemale. Pioneered in 1889 by Henri Brulle with the great Gavarnie guide Célestin Passet, the ice-encrusted couloir was not repeated until 1933, and was still seen as a major challenge when the Ravier's swarmed up it at the age of 17. With this audacious ascent they made their mark in impressive style.

That same year the twins became acquainted with Pic du Midi d'Ossau when they made the Petit Pic/Grand Pic traverse, and repeated the 1935 Ollivier/Mailly classic on the north face of the Petit Pic. They also took the Balaïtous by the north-west arête, climbed the neighbouring Pic Pallas, and above Lac d'Oô collected Pic des Spijeoles (by the Grand Dièdre), Pic Quayrat (by the central arête), and Pic Lézat via the Abadie/Arlaud Couloir on the west face.

There was a certain rashness in this early picking off of classic lines, as though dismissive of their stature. If it were not for their meticulous study of the literature, one might charitably suppose they climbed in blissful ignorance and were lucky to survive many of the lines they chose. But it's clear that they understood the serious nature of their selected routes, climbed with a natural affinity for the mountains that showed maturity beyond their years, and possessed full confidence in their own ability. That confidence was not misplaced.

Pic d'Ossau, for example, was to draw them back countless times in the coming decades. This shapely peak of 2885m stands alone a little north of Col du Pourtalet, with an easily recognised profile that's become the symbol of the range. Despite its modest altitude, it has a greater number and richer variety of routes than any other Pyrenean mountain, and over the years it was to become a Ravier speciality.

In February 1952 Jean and Pierre made the first of six attempts to achieve a winter ascent of the Petit Pic's north face which they'd climbed the previous summer, and returned to Pic d'Ossau four more times that year. It was a year of great momentum in which they achieved a winter traverse of the Crête du Diable on the Balaïtous, two ascents of the Grande Aiguille d'Ansabère, three routes on various Vignemale north faces (Pique Longue, Pointe de Chausenque and Petit Vignemale), and made the second ascent of the 1948 *voie Couzy* on the NE face of Pic des Crabioules (3116m).

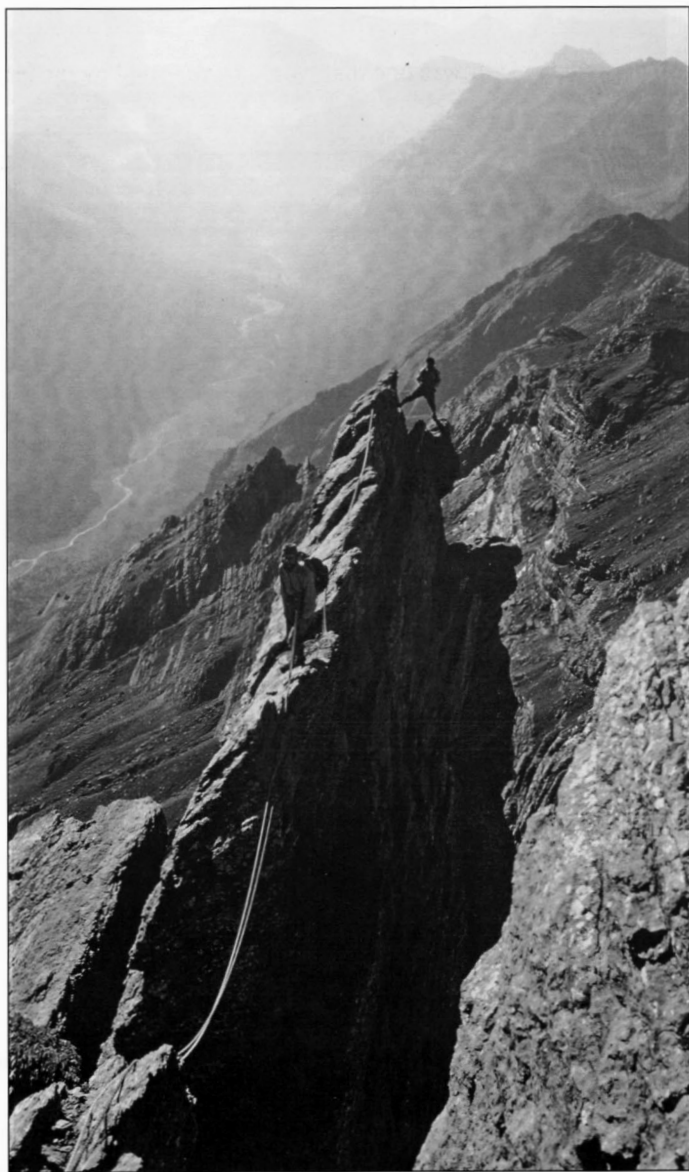
East of Gavarnie lie the cirques of Estaubé and Troumouze, and backing a section of the vast Cirque de Troumouze, the Barroude Wall took their attention. In that summer of 1952 the wall stood untouched. Long and immensely attractive, it backs a shallow lake and acres of rough pastureland. Pic Gerbats (2904m) is a significant lump towards the northern end



125. Jean & Pierre Ravier on the south face of the Doigt de Pombie (Pic d'Ossau) 1956. (*Jean & Pierre Ravier collection*)

of the wall, and its 400m high east face became the Ravier's first completely new route, their rope shared with Xavier Defos du Rau, a lawyer from Dax, 10 years their senior, who would become co-author with the brothers of one of the Ollivier guides.

A month after their Pic Gerbats climb, the Raviers made the exciting discovery of the 500m south face of Pic d'Estos in the Vallée du Louron, and created the first ascent of that face in fine style. That same summer, Jean went off to the Alps and made a fast ascent of the south arête of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey with André Armengaud.



126. The Esparrets Buttress, Mont Perdu, August 1973.
(Jean & Pierre Ravier collection)

Still in their teens, the following year they made another winter attempt on the Petit Pic d'Ossau's north face, but Jean was successful in creating a first ascent (with Armengaud again) of the SE face of Pointe Jean Santé, a prominent feature of Pic d'Ossau's Pombie Wall and a route that was quickly

established as a classic. It was one that would be repeated by the brothers several times in the coming years.

They also climbed the north-west arête of Pic d'Astazou above Gavarnie, spent the night in the Tuquerouye bivouac hut and next day made the ascent of Mont Perdu (Monte Perdido), third highest Pyrenean summit, via the north face, after its icefall had collapsed the previous winter.

To a Pyrenean *aficionado* the list of their early climbs is impressive enough. What makes it more so is the realisation that they were serving a mountaineering apprenticeship. Self-taught, with no sophisticated clothing or equipment, and living 200km or so from their mountains, the twins were (and still are) true amateurs who gave no thought to training or physical preparation of any kind. In his recently published biography of the brothers, *60 ans de Pyrénéisme*, Jean-François Labourie makes a comparison with other gifted climbers such as René Desmaison and Reinhold Messner. Desmaison trained almost obsessively at Fontainebleau in all weathers in advance of some of his major climbs, while in his late teens Messner had a list of about 100 summits to climb each season. Both displayed a programme of careful preparation mirrored by some of today's rising stars supported by sponsorship. The Raviers, on the other hand, worked through the week in Bordeaux and had to snatch what time they could at weekends for the long drive south, where their mountains would sometimes be out of condition. But no matter what the condition, winter or summer they'd tackle something, often being forced by a late start to bivouac in what they stood up in, without even the comfort of down jackets.

So they weathered the storms, tackled untried lines or routes that echoed with historic resonance, and exercised a passion that shows no sign of abating even now. Such an apprenticeship gave the foundation for a career that has carried them into their seventies.

The early days were not without their troubles. In November 1953 Jean was starting out on the north face of the curious thumb-like projection of the 2410m Capéran de Sesques set in remote country north of Pic d'Ossau. Though short, at the time of its first ascent in 1935 by François Cazalet and Roger Mailly, the north face was considered the most difficult artificial route in France, and 20 years on its reputation remained high, which is no doubt why Jean was drawn to it. But no sooner had the climb begun when he was hit by a falling rock which crushed his left foot.

Back in Bordeaux the diagnosis was such that amputation was considered, but a family friend, who happened to be a military doctor, intervened and eventually, without surgery, the broken foot was mended. Seven months later, Jean returned to the mountains with brother Pierre and Jacques Teillard, and made the first ascent of the north face of Piton Carré (3198m), which flanks the Couloir de Gaube on the Vignemale. A fortnight later the brothers were joined by Guy Santamaria to make the first ascent of the magnificent north face of the Grande Aiguille d'Ansabère, that great organ-pipe of rock set in a remote cirque approached from Lescun.

Climbing history is peppered with 'last great problems' which, when solved, are quickly relegated to history as new challenges arise. The north face of the Tour du Marboré was one such. First tried in 1945, the problem remained unsolved a decade later when, with Guy Santamaria once more, the Raviers endured poor conditions and a storm-ridden bivouac before making their retreat. Two further attempts also ended in defeat, but with Pierre detained on family business in Bordeaux, Jean teamed up with Claude Dufourmantelle and on 29-30 September 1956 they finally won through, reaching the summit at 3pm.

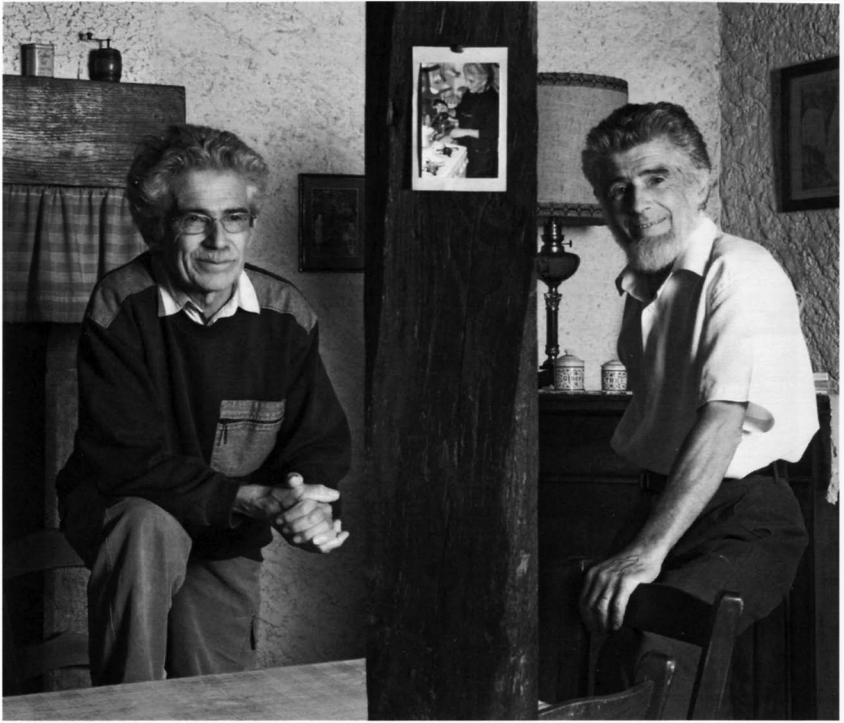
It's ironic that the foot, damaged four years earlier in the accident on the Capéran de Sesques, had healed sufficiently to enable Jean to create such epic north face routes as that of Piton Carré, Grande Aiguille d'Ansabère and the Tour du Marboré, but was considered serious enough to exempt him from military service in 1957. Pierre, of course, had no such excuse and was passed fit.

The brothers were committed pacifists who had taken part in anti-war protests, and the prospect of being drafted into the army was anathema to the unfortunate Pierre. One day when he should have been on guard duty, he went AWOL to join his brother in Bordeaux – a court martial offence. There followed a total of six months detention in a military prison, a month of which was spent in a tiny cell where, to combat boredom, he undertook exercise which he later claimed was the only time he ever trained. He was then posted to Algeria in a punishment battalion.

While his brother suffered military incarceration, Jean joined forces with fellow Pyrénéiste Marcel Kahn, and three Parisiens, Claude Jaccoux, Noël Blotti, and his partner from the Tour du Marboré, Claude Dufourmantelle. The five crossed into Spain and at the lower end of the Ordesa Canyon, attacked the broad vertical flake of Tozal del Mallo over the two days of 20-21 April 1957, thereby establishing a fresh milestone in Pyrenean climbing history. Four months later, Jean was joined by older sister Lysette to create a new route in the very centre of the Barroude Wall. Then in October the same year, Jean and Claude Dufourmantelle were reunited on a rope with Patrice de Bellefon and Raymond Despiau in making the first ascent of the Grande Aiguille d'Ansabère's east face.

Few climbers anywhere have maintained such a consistent record of high performance, but throughout the second half of the 20th century, Jean and Pierre Ravier were in the vanguard of Pyrenean exploration and endeavour, their routes reading like a tick-list of ambition. And yet, when the substance of their *carnets de course* is analysed, we see that the overall number of climbs in the Pyrenees (including failed attempts and family outings) is surprisingly modest – just 541 in the 50 years from 1950; but of these no less than 208 were first ascents.

By far the majority of their activity has been in the Pyrenees, of course, but Jean also climbed in the Caucasus in 1959 (Shkhara, Koshtan Tau, Dykh Tau and Elbrus); he was with Lionel Terray's Himalayan expedition



127. Pierre (*left*) and Jean Ravier in the family home at Tuzaguet, 2006.
(*Jean & Pierre Ravier collection*)

that made the first ascent of Jannu in 1962, and the brothers both took part in two expeditions to the Hoggar Mountains in 1970 and 1972 where they created a clutch of new routes.

Despite innate shyness and modesty, their moral conviction, originality of thought and non-conformity combined in an act outside the mountain environment that has since been replicated by others in many protest actions around the world. Having been part of a strong pacifist movement, one night in 1960 the brothers climbed the twin spires of Bordeaux cathedral and hung a banner between them protesting against the Algerian war.

The reverence with which the Raviers are held among fellow Pyrénéistes goes far beyond respect and admiration for their achievements on rock and snow and ice. Pyrénéisme transcends the physical act of climbing; its defining passion implies an aesthetic and moral attitude towards the whole Pyrenean environment. As the ultimate Pyrénéistes, Jean and Pierre's guiding principle echoes the words of Franz Schrader, the 19th century cartographer and explorer, who wrote: "When the mountain has captured your heart, all comes from her and leads you back to her."



128. Pierre and Jean Ravier with Kev Reynolds at Tuzaguet in June 2006.
(Jean & Pierre Ravier collection)

Such a romantic expression might sit uncomfortably with the pragmatic alpinist, but the Pyrenees demand affection and a response to favours received. The Raviers have made their response, and over the years have repaid the mountains' favours by devoting time, energy and talent in collaborating with Robert Ollivier in updating his series of guides to the

Pyrenees; to editing *Altitude* (the revue of the Groupe Pyrénéiste de Haute Montagne) from 1965-1970; to producing numerous articles, route notes and sketches of climbs for an assortment of publications; and by maintaining an irreplaceable archive of material relating to all things Pyrenean, and generously sharing information with others. Theirs is an attitude of selfless generosity noted by Lionel Terray in his book, *At Grips with Jannu*.

'I doubt whether I have ever known a higher degree of unselfishness than [Jean Ravier] exhibited – almost to the point of saintliness. If one of us was cold, Ravier took off his anorak and gave it to him. When he noticed that rations were short, he suddenly produced a loss of appetite, so as to make his share available to the others. His is a spirit of the most extreme sensitivity and I am sure he finds living in this egoistical and brutal world extremely difficult, but amid the never-failing purity of the peaks he has found a world in which to fulfil himself entirely, and he will remain one of the greatest mountaineers ever nurtured by the Pyrenees.' What is said of one, could equally be said of the other. Jean and Pierre Ravier are twins, after all; joint prophets of Pyrénéisme.

Time has passed and I need to return to Gavarnie before the celebrations begin. That pillow of cloud still obscures the summits as I set off at a jog and take a different route down, leaping streams and dodging the flowers. Soon among trees, I weave among pine and birch and alder on a stony trail that soon has me down to a large open meadow and the track leading to the village. The street is beginning to fill, and at the far end as I go up the slope a large man with a shock of hair and a blue sweatshirt steps in front of me.

'Monsieur Reynolds?' he asks. I nod, for I have no breath to speak. 'The brothers Ravier are waiting for you,' he says. 'Please come with me.'

I want to ask who he is, and how he knows who I am, but he's already walking away, so I follow. Moments later we're at the junction not far from the Maison du Parc. Sweat runs down my face and I need to change my clothes, but there stand the two brothers it's taken me 25 years to meet, and beside them, bless her, is Jean's wife Michèle who speaks English and will translate. Jean and Pierre have no English, I no French, so we simply beam at each other in the street. The Pyrenees has its own language, and the three of us understand it well.

Note: For much of the background to this article I am indebted to Jean-François Labourie and the late Rainier Munsch, whose biography of the Raviers, *60 ans de Pyrénéisme* was published in December 2006 by Éditions Pin à Crochets (see Reviews p358). *Petit Précis de Pyrénéisme* by Joseph Ribas (Éditions Loubatières, 1998) was another source of information, but most of all I am grateful to Jean and Pierre Ravier themselves for a quarter of a century of letters, articles, notes, photographs and books – the bounty of friendship.